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SUBJECT: BAHRAINIS CALL FOR BOYCOTT, NOT VIOLENCE, IN
CARTOON CONTROVERSY

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Summary

[11.](#) (SBU) Despite being angry and bewildered by the Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, Bahrainis have reacted in a relatively restrained manner compared with others in the region and Muslim world. Both Sunni and Shia Bahrainis have participated in entirely peaceful demonstrations protesting publication of the cartoons. The people responded immediately to calls for a boycott of Danish products, including that of the Bahrain Danish Dairy Company which, as owner Ibrahim Zainal has said publicly and repeatedly, is 100 percent Bahraini and has no connection to Denmark other than the name. The Cabinet and Council of Representatives officially condemned the cartoons. The Danish Consular Agent has publicly and privately praised the support of the GOB, and he told the Ambassador that no Danes in the country had encountered any problems. Clerics and columnists have weighed in on the issue, some stressing the clash of civilizations and other recommending a rational, unemotional response focusing on education and reconciliation. End Summary.

Angry and Confused

[12.](#) (U) Sunni and Shia Bahrainis have responded with anger and bewilderment to the controversy surrounding the Danish newspaper's publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed. Many Bahrainis consider the apologies of the Danish government and newspaper to be half-hearted and unsatisfactory because the statements were coupled with a defense of freedom of expression for an act that is nearly incomprehensible to many Muslims. The Sunni community was initially more outspoken in its protest of the cartoons. Perhaps because they were distracted by the occasion of Ashura (January 31-February 9), Shias were not as outspoken but did participate in demonstrations. Following Lebanese Hizballah Secretary General Nasrallah's public call on the 9th, however, Shias chanted the slogan "We are with you Mohammed" during Ashura processions later that day and the following day.

[13.](#) (U) Bahrainis participated in demonstrations across the country on Friday, February 3 in response to calls by clerics and activists. The demonstrations were entirely peaceful, though one politician, the anti-American, anti-Western Sunni MP Mohammed Khalid, called for burning Danish products. During Ashura processions in Manama's old downtown area, participants walked over Danish flags painted on wood that were nailed into the street. (Note: American and Israeli flags received the same treatment.)

Calls for Boycott Gain Immediate Traction

[14.](#) (U) There were calls for the boycott of Danish (and Norwegian) products almost immediately after the controversy broke in late January. The Al Muntazah supermarket chain announced it had stopped supplying all Danish products and offered a 50 percent discount on its existing stock. Other supermarkets placed signs that Danish products had been pulled from the shelves. The company hit hardest, however, is the local Bahrain Danish Dairy Company, a 100 percent Bahraini-owned and operated firm producing milk and other dairy products. Owner Ibrahim Zainal has appeared in the media repeatedly stating that the only thing Danish about the company is its name, a vestige of the pre-1993 period when it was operated as a joint venture with a Danish firm. The Arabic daily Al Watan newspaper published an interview February 12 with Bahraini employees of the company, who asked that their fellow citizens not boycott the company's products. Zainal said he is considering removing the word "Danish" from the firm's name.

15. (U) During its weekly meeting, the Cabinet January 29 denounced the cartoons. The Foreign Ministry sent a diplomatic note to the Danish government January 28 complaining about the cartoons and "the indifference of the Danish government toward the ongoing protests across the Arab world." The elected lower house of parliament, the Council of Representatives (COR), held a special session January 29 to discuss the issue. Sunni Salafi Second Deputy Chair of the COR Shaikh Adel Al Moawada said he had formed a committee called "The Best of People," a reference to Mohammed, to combat negative images of the Prophet and Islam, as did Salafi MP Shaikh Jassem Al Saeedi, whose committee is called "Defending the Prophet." The Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry condemned the cartoons but, despite pressure from parliament, did not support implementation of a formal boycott against Danish products.

The Danes Are All Right

16. (U) Danish Consular Agent in Bahrain Bjarne Bidsted told the press February 6 that Bahrain was and always would be safe for Danes and other foreigners, despite the Danish Foreign Ministry's issuance of a travel warning for Bahrain and 13 other countries in the region. Bidsted said he had been based in Bahrain for the past 23 years and had not faced any problems. He praised the Bahraini MFA for being attentive to their situation and pointed out that the demonstrations had all been peaceful. "Bahrainis were expressing their feelings, something they were entitled to do and, as I know, they returned to their homes in a peaceful manner without targeting any Dane," he said.

17. (SBU) The Ambassador spoke with Bidsted February 12 to offer assistance. Bidsted thanked the Ambassador and said that the GOB had provided him with additional security for his home and workplace. He had instructed the 75 Danes in country to adopt a low profile, in particular to remove any stickers or signs that would identify them as Danish. He had received no reports of Danes encountering problems in Bahrain.

93 Percent Support Boycott

18. (U) According to a poll conducted by Al Watan newspaper, 93 percent of some 560 Bahrainis surveyed support the boycott of Danish products. The study also showed that over one-third of those surveyed said that the most appropriate response to the controversy is to launch a media campaign to spread awareness about Islam in Europe. According to an on-line survey of website readers' opinions (www.alwatannews.net), as of mid-morning February 13, 80 percent of the 1,084 respondents support a boycott of Danish products.

Clerics, Columnists Add Their Voices

19. (U) For three consecutive Fridays, clerics have focused on the issue in their sermons. On January 27 and February 3, they condemned the cartoons and the papers that printed them, saying that the controversy would only make Muslims stronger and more loyal to their prophet and religion. In response to violence in parts of the Muslim world, Salafi Shaikh Salah Al Jowder February 10 rejected violence and advised that Muslims should not allow their anger to cause them to lose their "brothers in humanity" and friends in the international community. Sunni preacher Shaikh Juma Tawfiq took a different approach, saying that "the war" launched on Muslims by the enemies of Islam continued.

110. (U) Arabic daily Akhbar Al Khaleej Editor-in-Chief Anwar Abdul Rahman February 12 criticizes the Danish government for refusing to apologize to Muslims for the cartoons. He calls on Muslims to act rationally instead of emotionally and argues that the UN should officially ban mocking Islam "just as it has banned ridiculing the Holocaust" and equating Zionism with racism. He rhetorically asks the Danish prime minister if he would have reacted differently if the newspaper had derided the Holocaust.

111. (U) Sayed Zahra of the same newspaper writes on February 7 that Muslims have a right to be angry and protest the disrespectful cartoons. However, he rejects resorting to violence. "There are so many civilized ways that Muslims can express their resentment toward the incident. Religious leaders, writers, and politicians are responsible for reinforcing peaceful and civilized methods of protest."

Education, Reconciliation, not War

¶12. (U) Esmat Al Mousawi of Arabic daily Al Ayam argues February 12 that even when Muslims have a good cause, they turn the situation against themselves. Muslims "fell into a trap" and acted according to the Western stereotype. She says that neither side has control over its people: "They say they cannot curb freedom of expression and we say we cannot curb the anger of our people. We must start with ourselves and reconcile with other Muslims and with our own religion before we confront the enemies of our religion."

¶13. (U) Sawsan Al Shaer of Al Watan February 13 calls for Muslims to reject violence and focus instead on education. She suggests the collection of one dollar from each Muslim to purchase advertising space in Danish and Norwegian newspapers to provide historical background information on Mohammed and his just treatment of Christians and Jews. She adds, "Mohammed, who was depicted with a bomb-like turban, is an image that was spread and reinforced by Bin Laden. Instead of waging war against the West, we should realize that Prophet Mohammed gave us values and principles that we must convey to others."

Comment

¶14. (SBU) Compared with other Arab and Muslim countries, Bahrain's reaction to the cartoon controversy has been fairly restrained. Although even the boycott of Danish products seems misguided -- it punishes mostly Bahrainis who own or work for local firms with real or assumed links to Denmark -- it is a non-violent way to express the rejection of and anger at the cartoons. While defenses of freedom of expression are convincing to Western ears, they have no resonance in a society where religion forbids any drawings of Mohammed and other prophets, even if favorable. Opinion leaders seek to use the controversy to suit their own purposes, some to divide and others to educate.

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